

DESSERTS

With choices such as mango, papaya, and guava, it is little surprise that many Mexican meals end with slices of tropical fruit or a fruit ice. Traditional Spanish desserts such as flan and bread pudding are also favorites. In recent years, various chocolate cakes have been created, such as the one in this chapter with the complementary rich, fruity flavor of ancho chiles, a combination that was used in the courts of the Aztecs as a beverage.

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CARAMELIZING SUGAR

Always use caution when caramelizing sugar, as the syrup is dangerously hot. Use a heavy, light-colored saucepan, preferably copper, so you can judge the color of the syrup. The addition of a little corn syrup helps prevent the sugar from recrystallizing on the sides of the pan. Once all the ingredients are in the pan, the sugar has dissolved, and the liquid has begun to turn amber, do not stir it. Also, never leave the stove once the syrup starts to color. The caramelizing process is quick, and the syrup can burn easily.

In a small, heavy saucepan over medium high-heat, combine the sugar, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (2 fl oz/60 ml) water, and the corn syrup and bring to a boil, stirring only a few times, until the syrup is clear. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer, without stirring, until the syrup begins to darken, 10–15 minutes. Swirl the pan until the syrup is a deep amber, about 1 minute. Immediately pour the caramel into a 9-by-2-inch (23-by-5-cm) round cake pan or into 8–10 individual molds and tilt to distribute it evenly over the bottom and a little up the sides. Set aside.

Preheat the oven to 325°F (165°C). In a large saucepan over medium-low heat, combine the condensed milk, half-and-half, whole milk, and cinnamon and bring to a simmer. Remove from the heat and let steep for 10 minutes. Remove the cinnamon and stir in the Kahlúa and the diluted coffee. In a bowl, lightly whisk the eggs until blended. Gradually whisk in the warm milk mixture and then the vanilla. Strain the mixture through a fine-mesh sieve into the prepared mold(s). Place the mold(s) in a large roasting pan and put on the center rack of the oven. Pour boiling water to a depth of 1 inch (2.5 cm) into the baking pan. Bake, uncovered, until just set and a knife inserted near the center comes out clean, 1–1½ hours for the large flan, and 40–60 minutes for the individual molds. Remove the roasting pan from the oven, remove the flan(s), and transfer to a wire rack. Let cool, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or for up to 2 days.

To unmold, run a thin knife around the inside edge of the mold(s). Place a serving plate with a rim over the top and invert the plate and flan together. Lift off the mold carefully, scraping out any of the remaining caramel to run over the flan and around the plate. If you have made a large flan, cut into thin wedges to serve.

MAKES 8–10 SERVINGS

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup (5 oz/155 g) sugar

1 tablespoon corn syrup

1 can (14 fl oz/430 ml)
sweetened condensed
milk

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6 fl oz/180 ml)
half-and-half (half cream)

1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml)
whole milk

2-inch (5-cm) piece true
cinnamon bark (page 85)
or 1-inch (2.5-cm) piece
cassia cinnamon bark

1 tablespoon Kahlúa or
other coffee-flavored
liqueur

2 teaspoons instant coffee
granules dissolved in
1 teaspoon boiling water

5 large eggs

$\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon vanilla extract
(essence)



BRANDY-INFUSED BREAD PUDDING

6 cups cubed day-old French bread (¾-inch/2-cm cubes)

¼ cup (2 fl oz/60 ml) canola or peanut oil

½ lb (250 g) *piloncillo* (far right), or 1 cup (7 oz/220 g) firmly packed dark brown or raw sugar

½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) apple juice

½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) brandy or apple juice

4 tablespoons (2 oz/60 g) unsalted butter

4-inch (10-cm) piece true cinnamon bark (page 85) or 2-inch (5-cm) piece cassia cinnamon bark, plus 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

3 large eggs

5 tablespoons (2½ fl oz/75 ml) whole milk

¼ teaspoon ground allspice

1 cup (4 oz/125 g) shredded *queso Chihuahua* (see Notes, page 44) or extra-sharp white Cheddar cheese

2 apples, peeled, cored, and chopped

½ cup (3 oz/90 g) raisins

½ cup (2 oz/60 g) pine nuts or chopped pecans, lightly toasted (page 115)

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C). Butter a 9-by-13-inch (23-by-33-cm) baking dish. Put the bread cubes into a bowl, add the oil, and toss to coat evenly. Spread the bread cubes on a baking sheet, place in the oven, and toast, turning occasionally to color all sides, until golden, 5–10 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool.

In a saucepan over medium heat, combine the *piloncillo*, 2 cups (16 fl oz/500 ml) water, apple juice, and brandy and bring to a low boil, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Add 1 tablespoon of the butter and the cinnamon bark. Stir until the butter melts, and then simmer until the syrup thickens, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat, and remove and discard the cinnamon bark. You should have at least 3 cups (24 fl oz/750 ml) syrup.

Spread half of the bread cubes over the bottom of the prepared dish. In a small bowl, whisk the eggs until blended, then whisk in the milk, ground cinnamon, and allspice. Dribble half of the egg mixture evenly over the bread. Sprinkle evenly with half of the cheese, apples, raisins, and nuts, then very slowly pour about 1½ cups (12 fl oz/375 ml) of the syrup evenly over the surface. Cut the remaining 3 tablespoons butter into small pieces and, using half of the pieces, dot the surface. Layer the remaining bread on top, dribble with the remaining egg mixture, and sprinkle with the remaining cheese, apples, raisins, and nuts. Very slowly pour the remaining syrup evenly over the surface so that all of it is absorbed into the bread. Dot with the remaining butter pieces.

Bake, uncovered, until the top is lightly browned, about 25 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool slightly before serving.

Note: Bread pudding, or capirotada, is a traditional Lenten dish in Mexico and would usually follow a meal of fish or vegetable fritters. It also makes a simple but filling snack when drenched with cold milk.

MAKES 10–12 SERVINGS



PILONCILLO

Piloncillo is unrefined sugar and an everyday sweetener in Mexico. It is formed by pouring boiled sugarcane syrup into cone-, bar-, or disk-shaped molds, where it hardens into a dark brown crystallized sugar. Cones, weighing from 1 to 7 ounces (30 to 220 g), are the most common shape found outside Mexico. They can be quite hard and may need to be chopped into pieces, though they will dissolve easily in liquid. Dark brown sugar can be substituted, but it does not have the same deep flavor. Look for *piloncillo* in the ethnic food section of your market or in Mexican grocery stores.



MANGO ICE



PREPARING MANGOES

To prepare a mango for use in this recipe, stand the mango on one end. With a large, sharp knife, cut down one of the flat sides, cutting around and against the pit. You should have 1 large piece. Repeat on the other side of the mango. Place each piece flesh side up and carefully score the flesh in a grid pattern just down to, but not piercing, the peel. Press against the center of the peel to invert, pushing out the scored cubes of flesh. Then, using the knife, cut the cubes away from the peel. Scrape the peel to remove any remaining flesh.

In a saucepan over high heat, bring the sugar and 1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) water to a boil, stirring with a wooden spoon until the sugar dissolves and a light syrup forms. Remove from the heat and let cool. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

In a blender or food processor, purée the mango pulp until smooth. You should have about 3 cups (1½ lb/750 g). Transfer to a bowl and add the sugar syrup, orange zest, and the Cointreau, if using. Stir well. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, at least 3 hours or up to 24 hours.

Transfer the chilled mixture to an ice-cream maker and freeze according to the manufacturer's instructions. Cover and freeze until firm, at least 2 hours or up to 1 day, before serving. To serve, spoon or scoop the ice into dessert bowls and garnish with mint. Serve at once.

MAKES ABOUT 1 QT (1 L)

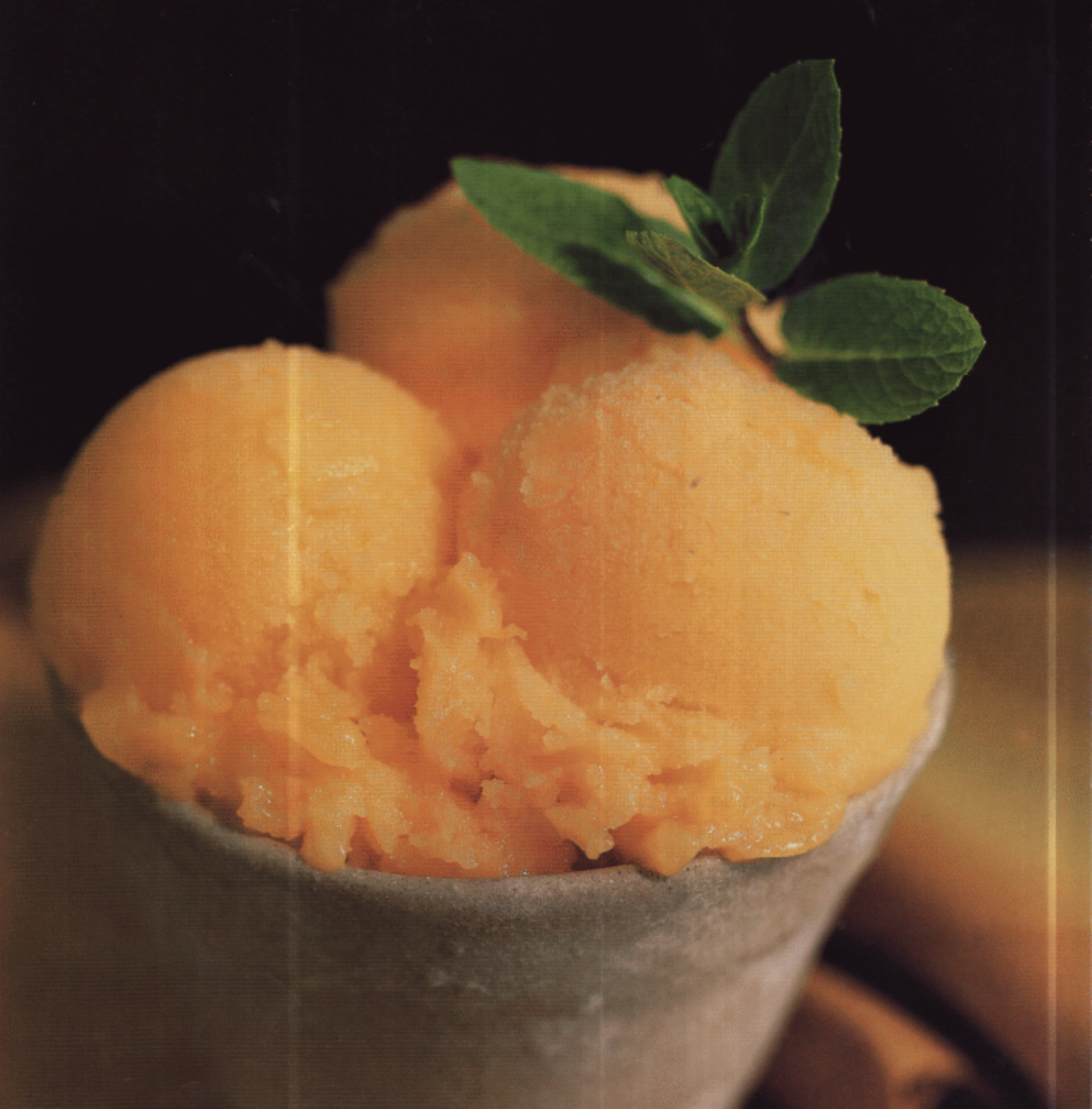
1 cup (8 oz/250 g) sugar

4 large, ripe mangoes,
pitted and cubed (*far left*),
or 1 jar (1½ lb/750 g)
mangoes in light syrup,
drained

Grated zest of 1 orange

1 teaspoon Cointreau or
other orange-flavored
liqueur (optional)

Mint sprigs for garnish



MANDARIN MOUSSE

1 can (11 oz/345 g)
mandarin oranges, drained

2 large eggs, separated

6 tablespoons (3 oz/90 g)
sugar

2¼ teaspoons (1 package)
unflavored powdered
gelatin

1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml)
heavy (double) cream,
chilled

2 tablespoons Cointreau
or other orange-flavored
liqueur or mandarin juice

Grated zest of 2 mandarin
oranges, tangerines, or
oranges (page 74)

½ cup (1½ oz/45 g) sliced
(flaked) almonds, toasted
(page 115)

Finely chop the mandarin orange segments, then lay the pieces on paper towels to absorb the excess moisture. Set aside.

In a stainless-steel or other heatproof bowl, stir together the egg whites and 4 tablespoons (2 oz/60 g) of the sugar. Place over (but not touching) simmering water in a saucepan until the sugar dissolves, about 1 minute. Remove from the heat and, using an electric mixer on medium-high speed, beat until soft peaks form and the mixture is cool. Set aside. Rinse the beaters.

In a small stainless-steel bowl, stir the egg yolks with a fork until blended. Set aside. In a small saucepan over medium heat, stir together the remaining 2 tablespoons sugar and ¼ cup (2 fl oz/60 ml) water and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat, sprinkle on the gelatin, and whisk until dissolved. (It will be lumpy at first; continue whisking until smooth.) Pour the warm gelatin mixture over the egg yolks and, using the electric mixer on medium speed, beat until the mixture is cool. Set aside. Rinse the beaters.

In a large bowl, using the electric mixer on medium-high speed, beat the cream until soft peaks form. Add the Cointreau and beat for just a moment to incorporate. Fold in the egg-white mixture and then the egg-yolk mixture. Add the mandarin orange pieces and the citrus zest and fold gently to distribute evenly without deflating the mixture.

Divide the mousse among 4 or 5 individual goblets, or spoon into a single serving bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until ready to serve.

Just before serving, garnish the mousse with the toasted almonds.

MAKES 4 OR 5 SERVINGS



MANDARIN ORANGES

The Spanish first introduced citrus fruits in Mexico during the sixteenth century. Among the types they brought was the diminutive mandarin, which has a refreshing, somewhat bittersweet tang, as well as loose skin that makes it very easy to peel. Citrus terminology can be confusing, however. In the United States, some mandarin varieties are known as tangerines, a name that came into fashion in the nineteenth century when many mandarins were cultivated in North Africa, around the city of Tangier.



POLVORONES



POLVORONES

Moorish in origin, *polvorones*, crumbly shortbreadlike cookies, were transplanted intact to Mexico by the Spanish, although they are similar to other short-crust cookies found throughout northern Europe. They were traditionally made with lard in Mexico, but nowadays solid vegetable shortening is often used to produce a lighter crumb and butter is added for flavor. For weddings, *polvorones* are wrapped individually in white tissue paper, the paper is twisted closed on opposite sides, and then the ends are shredded decoratively. For other celebrations, brightly colored tissue paper is used.

In a bowl, using an electric mixer on medium speed, beat together the butter and shortening until creamy. Add $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups (5 oz/150 g) of the confectioners' sugar, the orange zest, and the orange juice and beat until blended.

In another bowl, stir together the flour, nuts, and sea salt. Add the flour mixture 1 tablespoon at a time to the butter mixture, beating until thoroughly incorporated. The dough will be crumbly. Transfer the dough to a large sheet of plastic wrap and press the dough into a ball. Wrap and then refrigerate for 1–2 hours.

Position a rack in the upper third of the oven and preheat the oven to 325°F (165°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment (baking) paper or with a silicone baking mat.

Using your hands, roll small pieces of the dough into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch (2-cm) balls. Place the balls on the prepared baking sheet, spacing them about 1 inch (2.5 cm) apart and gently pressing them to flatten slightly.

Bake the cookies until the edges turn pale gold, 10–15 minutes.

Meanwhile, place the remaining 1 cup (3 oz/90 g) confectioners' sugar in a shallow bowl. When the cookies are ready, remove the baking sheet from the oven. While they are still hot, using a spatula, remove the cookies one at a time and carefully roll them in the sugar. Set aside on a rack and let cool completely, then roll them again in the sugar, shaking off any excess.

Serve the cookies at once, or layer between sheets of parchment paper in an airtight container and store at room temperature for up to 3 days.

MAKES ABOUT 3 DOZEN COOKIES

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (4 oz/125 g)
unsalted butter, at room
temperature

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (4 oz/125 g) solid
vegetable shortening

$2\frac{1}{2}$ cups (8 oz/250 g)
sifted confectioners'
(icing) sugar

1 teaspoon finely grated
orange zest

1 tablespoon fresh
orange juice

2 cups (10 oz/315 g)
unbleached all-purpose
(plain) flour

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup ($2\frac{1}{2}$ oz/75 g)
ground walnuts

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon sea salt



CHOCOLATE CAKE WITH ANCHO WHIPPED CREAM

Nonstick vegetable-oil
cooking spray

1 tablet (3 oz/90 g) Mexican
chocolate (page 27), coarsely
chopped

1 cup (5½ oz/170 g)
blanched almonds, toasted
(page 115)

⅓ cup (1½ oz/45 g)
all-purpose (plain) flour,
sifted

¼ cup (¾ oz/20 g) Dutch-
process cocoa powder, sifted

2 ancho chiles, seeded and
toasted (page 108), then
ground (page 114)

½ cup (4 oz/125 g) unsalted
butter, at room temperature

1 cup (8 oz/250 g) granulated
sugar

6 large eggs, separated,
at room temperature

1 tablespoon Kahlúa or
crème de cacao liqueur

¼ teaspoon almond extract
(essence)

Pinch of sea salt

Ancho Whipped Cream
(far right)

Finely grated bittersweet
chocolate or chocolate curls

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C). Line the bottom of a 9-by-2½-inch (23-by-6-cm) springform pan with parchment (baking) paper. Lightly coat the pan sides with the cooking spray. In a food processor, combine the chocolate and almonds and pulse to grind finely. Transfer to a small bowl; add the flour, cocoa, and 1 tablespoon of the ground chiles and whisk to mix. In a large bowl, using an electric mixer on medium speed, beat the butter until pale, about 2 minutes. Reduce the speed to low and gradually add ½ cup (4 oz/125 g) of the granulated sugar, stopping the mixer at times to scrape down the bowl sides. Increase the speed to medium and beat until the mixture is light and fluffy, 3–5 minutes. Add the egg yolks one at a time, beating until the mixture is smooth, stopping to scrape down the bowl sides. With the mixer on low speed, add the ground chocolate mixture, Kahlúa, and almond extract and beat just until blended.

In a large bowl, combine the egg whites and sea salt. Using clean beaters, beat on low speed until frothy. Gradually add the remaining granulated sugar while beating constantly. Increase the speed to medium-high and beat until the whites form stiff, glossy peaks, about 2 minutes. Using a large rubber spatula, gently fold a third of the whites into the batter. Fold in the remaining whites in 2 batches just until combined. Transfer the batter to the prepared pan and smooth the surface. Place the pan on a baking sheet to catch any drips. Bake the cake until a toothpick comes out clean, 40–45 minutes. Transfer the cake to a wire rack and let cool for 15 minutes. Release the sides of the pan and lift off. Place a wire rack on top of the cake and invert the cake and rack together. Lift off the pan bottom and paper and let cool completely.

Whisk the ancho whipped cream until thick enough to hold its shape. Place the cake, bottom side up, on a serving plate and coat with a thick layer of the cream. Top with grated chocolate and serve.

MAKES 10–12 SERVINGS



ANCHO WHIPPED CREAM

In a small bowl, whisk together ⅓ cup (3 fl oz/80 ml) heavy (double) cream and 1 teaspoon of the ground ancho chile powder. Let stand for up to 5 minutes. Whisk again and pour into a chilled large bowl. Add 1¼ cups (10 fl oz/310 ml) more cream and 1 tablespoon vanilla extract (essence) and, using an electric mixer on low speed, beat until the cream thickens. Increase the speed to medium-high and beat until soft peaks form. Reduce the speed to medium and gradually add 3 tablespoons sifted confectioners' (icing) sugar, beating until soft mounds form.



RUM-RAISIN CHEESECAKE



MEXICAN VANILLA

The Totonaco people of Veracruz were the first to ferment and dry the vanilla bean, the seed-pod of a climbing orchid native to Mexico. Vanilla is now grown in many tropical parts of the world, with Madagascar the top producer. True Mexican vanilla, which is deeply flavored and richly scented, is highly prized.

In the past, however, some unscrupulous producers created a serious scare by marketing imitation vanilla that contained coumarin, a highly toxic substance. Always seek out products labeled "pure vanilla extract" from the Papantla region, in the state of Veracruz, for the finest Mexican product.

To make the crust, in a bowl, stir together the crushed gingersnaps and butter until the crumbs are evenly moistened. Transfer the crumbs to a 9-by-2½-inch (23-by-6-cm) springform pan and press evenly onto the bottom and 1 inch (2.5 cm) up the sides to form a thin, even crust. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C). Put the raisins in a small saucepan, add the rum, and heat over medium heat until the raisins are plump and soft, about 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and set aside.

In a bowl, using an electric mixer on medium speed, beat the cream cheese until smooth. Add ¾ cup (6 oz/185 g) of the sugar and 1 teaspoon of the vanilla and beat until blended. Add the eggs one at a time, beating just until smooth after each addition and stopping to scrape down the sides and along the bottom of the bowl so that the ingredients are thoroughly mixed. Add the raisins and rum and the orange zest and beat just until well mixed. Pour the filling into the prepared crust. Bake until firm, 50–60 minutes. Remove the cheesecake from the oven and immediately place in the refrigerator on a kitchen towel to chill for 15 minutes. Raise the oven temperature to 450°F (230°C).

In a bowl, stir together the sour cream, the remaining ¼ cup (2 oz/65 g) sugar, and the remaining 2 teaspoons vanilla. Remove the cheesecake from the refrigerator, pour the sour cream mixture evenly over the top, and return the cheesecake to the oven to bake for 10 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool completely, then cover and refrigerate until well chilled, at least 24 hours or for up to 3 days. To serve, release the sides of the springform pan and lift off; leave the cake on the pan bottom. Transfer the cake to a serving plate. Serve cold or at room temperature.

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

FOR THE CRUST:

1½ cups (4½ oz/140 g)
finely crushed gingersnaps
(about 36)

4 tablespoons (2 oz/60 g)
unsalted butter, melted

½ cup (3 oz/90 g) raisins

¼ cup (2 fl oz/60 ml)
dark rum

1½ lb (750 g) cream cheese,
at room temperature

1 cup (8 oz/250 g) sugar

3 teaspoons vanilla extract
(essence)

3 large eggs

1 teaspoon finely grated
orange zest

2 cups (16 oz/500 g) sour
cream



MEXICAN BASICS

Mexican food is true fusion cuisine. When the indigenous peoples merged their trio of essential ingredients— corn, beans, and tomatoes—and their flavorings—chocolate, vanilla, and, of course, chiles—with the wheat, meats, rice, citrus fruits, and spices introduced by the Spanish, one of the world's most popular and exciting cuisines was born. The following information will help you to re-create Mexico's traditional dishes in your own kitchen.

REGIONAL TRADITIONS

The foods of Mexico, like the land itself, are diverse. This vast country— more than 2,000 miles (3,400 km) from top to bottom, and just about that wide on its northern border— embraces expansive stretches of desert, high mountain ranges, verdant seaside plains, steaming jungles, and fertile plateaus surrounded by forested hillsides. Slow-moving rivers snake their way through swamps of mangroves, while numerous lakes and more than 6,000 miles (9,900 km) of coastal waters bordering the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico teem with fish and shellfish. Each of these terrains has vastly

different-plants and animals, and in each are people with varied cultural histories and cuisines.

In general, the northern border states are considered cattle country, with simple grilled meats, red beans, flour tortillas, and lots of cheese and other dairy products. In central Mexico, the foods are more complex. Even in the years before the Spanish conquest, the ancient cities of Teotihuacán and Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) were the center of major trade routes, and exotic foods from distant regions of the country were often used in the preparation of local dishes.

With the arrival of the Spanish (especially the convent nuns of Puebla), elaborate dishes such as Mole Poblano (page 26) and Stuffed Poblano Chiles with Walnut Sauce (page 18) were created—dishes that have earned a place at the nucleus of Mexico's cuisine. The Spanish, after 300 years of Moorish domination, were themselves influenced by North African culinary traditions, including the use of such ingredients as citrus fruits and rice. When the Spanish came to Mexico, they brought some of their adopted foods along with them. In time, these new items became part of Mexico's culinary heritage as

well.

Seafood is the food of choice on both coasts, but it is in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico where it is served with the most gusto and variety. Much of the influence here is from the Caribbean, with a strong Spanish touch. Capers and olives are as much at home in local dishes as chiles are, and all three can be found in Veracruz-Style Red Snapper (page 25). The foods of the three states that make up the Yucatan peninsula, that flat thumb of land jutting out between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, strongly reflect the Mayan past of its indigenous peoples, making this a cuisine very different from those of other regions. The Mayan practices of flavoring dishes such as chicken or pork with *achiote* (page 113) and cooking them underground as in Pibil-Style Baked Chicken (page 66) remain virtually unchanged today.

INGREDIENTS

In a country of such diverse regions and culinary traditions, there is almost no limit to the variety of ingredients found in local kitchens. If you are fortunate to be able to visit and shop in a market in

Mexico, some still in the same locations they occupied thousands of years ago, you will be overwhelmed by the abundance of fruits, vegetables, chiles, herbs, and spices. This is truly one-stop shopping, with vendors offering everything from live turkeys, freshly made cheeses, and sea salt to colorful oilcloth for covering your table. But just because you find a ripe, ready-to-eat papaya or mango one day, do not expect to find the same fruit on the next. The markets in Mexico reflect the seasons.

More and more of the super-markets in the United States are carrying fresh ingredients used in Mexican cooking, especially chiles, tomatillos, and jicama. If your market does not have them, just ask, as they are available and can be ordered. For other ingredients, check out the Mexican grocery stores in your area, or search for Internet or mail-order sources. Following is a discussion of the four most basic ingredients in Mexican cooking.

CHILES

When most people think about Mexican food, it is the fiery chile that first comes to mind. Seldom does

a dish arrive at the table without having chiles in it or without a chile-infused salsa served alongside. Chiles, either fresh or dried, are indispensable ingredients in almost all dishes except sweets and desserts—and even occasionally show up in them, too.

While all chiles have some degree of pungency, this varies tremendously, just as there is a broad range of flavor differences. With the exception of the small jalapenos and serranos, do not try to substitute one chile for another, or you will come up with a completely different-tasting dish. These two chiles do differ, with the serrano having a grassier flavor, but they can usually be interchanged satisfactorily. A large selection of fresh chiles is now available at most supermarkets. The jalapeño and serrano are usually chopped and used in salsas or pickled whole, and the larger jalapenos are sometimes stuffed. But it is the big, pudgy poblano that is most often stuffed for *chiles rellenos* (see the recipe on page 18 for Stuffed Poblano Chiles with Walnut Sauce, a well-known version of the dish). The poblano is also frequently roasted and cut into strips, or *rajas*, and used as a condiment or as a topping.

Sometimes fresh chiles are roasted and seeded, then stuffed, sliced, or chopped. Shown opposite are the steps for roasting and seeding them. For more information on handling fresh chiles, see page 39.

1 Roasting fresh chiles: Using tongs, place the chiles directly in or over the high flame of a gas stove and turn often until the skin is charred and blistered, 2-3 minutes. Or roast the chiles over the very hot fire of a charcoal or gas grill for 3-5 minutes, placing them as close to the fire as possible. Alternatively, broil (grill) the chiles on an aluminum foil-lined pan, placing them as close to the heat source as possible and turning them often, until blackened, 5-10 minutes. (Broiled chiles will be too soft to stuff but can be used for other recipes.)

2 Steaming the chiles: After roasting, place the chiles in a paper or heavy-duty plastic bag and let sweat for about 8 minutes to help loosen the skin. This will also soften the flesh, so do not leave them too long.

3 Removing the skin: Pick and peel away as much skin as possible. Do not worry if some charred bits remain.

4 Seeding the chiles: For stuffing (shown here), using a small knife, slit each chile lengthwise from the stem area to the bottom, leaving $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (12 mm) uncut on top and at least $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6 mm) on the bottom. Leaving the stem intact, remove the seeds and membranes with your fingers. Wipe the inside of the chile with a damp towel, checking to see that all the seeds and membranes are removed. Dry well.

For slicing or chopping, slit the chile lengthwise and spread it out. Cut out the stem, then remove the seeds and membranes.



Purchasing dried chiles can be confusing, as they are sometimes mislabeled in the market, but again, each variety has a distinct taste and the chiles cannot be used inter-changeably. Some dried chiles, such as the ancho, can be stuffed, but most are used in salsas or as an integral part of a dish such as a mole.

Ancho, mulato, and pasilla chiles are used in traditional Mole Poblano (page 26), and the distinct flavor of the guajillo is found in many stewlike dishes, including Pork Tatemado (page 85). Some of the very hot dried chiles, such as the árbol, are toasted and ground for use as chile powder. One of the most popular of all dried chiles is the chipotle, the smoked and dried jalapeño. This chile is most commonly pickled or prepared in an adobo sauce (see page 77), and many dishes benefit from its rich flavor.

To seed dried chiles, wipe them with a damp cloth, then slit them lengthwise and use a small, sharp knife to remove the seeds.

To toast dried chiles, clean them with a damp cloth, then heat a *comal*, griddle, or heavy frying pan over medium heat. Add the whole or seeded chile, press down firmly for a few seconds with a spatula, turn

the chile, and press down for just a few seconds more before removing. The chile should change color slightly and start to give off its aroma.

CORN

Throughout Mexico, corn is the most common culinary element. Com *masa* (page 35) is the fundamental ingredient in corn tortillas, which are the bread, the plate, and the spoon of Mexican cuisine. They are also wrapped around tasty bites of food to make tacos, folded over cheese for quesadillas, or fashioned into enchiladas. Corn *masa* is patted and pinched into various shapes, too, and, depending on the region, turned into *flautas* (page 39) and other *antojitos* (little bites and snacks). Nor can we forget the part *masa* plays in tamales (page 20), which are on the menu at almost every special occasion in Mexico.

TOMATOES

The tomato has been an essential ingredient in Mexican cuisine since pre-Columbian times. Cooks rely on vine-ripened, sweet, deep red tomatoes and, unless used fresh, usually roast them before using.

To roast tomatoes, line a heavy frying pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil and heat over medium heat. Roast the tomatoes, turning them occasionally, until the skins are blackened and the interiors soften. The most blackened skin may be removed before using.

BEANS

Seldom a day goes by that protein-rich beans are not eaten in one form or another in Mexican households. Through the ages, it has been these humble legumes that, along with the corn in *masa*, have provided the fundamental nourishment for the Mexican people. Black beans are cooked in the southern regions, while pinto beans are customary in the north, but myriad other varieties are cooked throughout the country as well. For two basic bean dishes to serve alongside the recipes in this book, or on their own sprinkled with a little cheese, see page 111.

TECHNIQUES AND EQUIPMENT

It is truly the sauce that defines the dish in Mexican cuisine—not bland flour-thickened sauces, but aromatic ones with an abundance of flavor that

captivates the senses. If a dish is not made with a seed- or nut-based sauce such as a mole or *pipián*, it will be cloaked with a robust tomato sauce. Even a plain piece of grilled meat will be accompanied with a table salsa. And the framework for all of these will be not only the ingredients but also the techniques and equipment used to prepare them.

There are a few essential techniques in Mexican cuisine: roasting, toasting, and searing. All three are designed to bring out the full flavor of the ingredients on which they are used.

Whether tomatoes, tomatillos, chiles, onions, or garlic, roasting—or briefly bringing ingredients in contact with high heat—causes the flavors of the ingredient to take on a smoky character. Roasting is achieved by directly exposing an ingredient to a heat source, as with roasting chiles over a gas flame on the stove top, or by using a *comal*, griddle, or heavy frying pan, as with garlic, onions, and tomatoes. Spices are almost always toasted briefly while whole and then ground, while nuts are toasted before chopping. The depth of flavor of dried chiles is also intensified when lightly toasted. To toast these ingredients, use a *comal*, griddle, or frying pan.

The first step to making most *cooked Mexican sauces* is to bring the pureed mixture into contact with a hot oil-coated surface. This searing concentrates and melds the often harsh and disparate flavors of the ingredients into a robust, earthy blend. It also helps to thicken the sauce and deepen its color. Traditional Mexican cooks use an earthenware *cazuela* (page 113) for cooking these sauces, but you can substitute a heavy-bottomed metal pot. A cast-iron Dutch oven (preferably enamel-coated) is an especially good choice, as it has deep sides to contain any splatters when the puree first hits the hot surface and it retains heat well.

Following are some other tools you will need to prepare many of the dishes in this book.

The blender has become one of the most important cooking utensils in the Mexican kitchen. It is indispensable for making sauces and has replaced the traditional *molcajete*, or basalt mortar (page 115), in all but the most rural areas. A *molcajete* is still an important tool for making chunky sauces, such as salsas and guacamole, or for grinding small amounts of spices and seeds. Considerable time is saved by using a blender for smooth sauces, however. A food

processor is not recommended for blending or pureeing the sauces *in this book*, as it will not completely puree the tougher ingredients such as nuts and dried-chile skins. A selection of sieves, including medium- and fine-mesh types, is ideal for straining blended sauces. When straining a sauce, use the back of a large spoon, if necessary, to push the sauce through the sieve.

Similarly, an electric spice or small coffee grinder (page 114) is an excellent time-saving device. This tool makes quick work of grinding the whole spices and seeds essential in Mexican cooking.

One of the most frequently used utensils in the Mexican kitchen is a metal or clay *comal* (page 114). A cast-iron griddle or heavy cast-iron frying pan may be substituted. Perfect for roasting and toasting ingredients, this tool is also essential for making or warming tortillas.

Authentic tamales steamers can be purchased in most Mexican grocery stores, but any big pot with a tight lid will work. You will also need a steamer basket or a perforated rack that can be propped up at least 3 inches (7.5 cm) above the bottom of the pan (see page 21). Specialized Mexican steamers have an

opening with a spout in the lower section, so that additional water can be poured into the pot.

While Mexican food can be served in most any type of dinnerware, to do it justice, search out colorful Talavera serving dishes and table settings if price is no object. For more affordable substitutes, check your local Mexican markets or other stores.

BASIC RECIPES

Here are some of the basic recipes referred to throughout this book.

WHITE RICE

2 tablespoons canola or safflower oil

1½ cups (10½ oz/330 g) long-grain white rice

¼ white onion, sliced or chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

2½ cups (20 fl oz/625 ml) chicken stock (this page, far right), prepared low-sodium broth, or water

1 bay leaf

Sea salt

2 serrano or jalapeño chiles (optional)

In a heavy saucepan over medium heat, heat the oil. When hot, add the rice and stir with a wooden spoon until the rice is chalky white and speckled with tan, 7-8 minutes. You will hear the sounds of dry cracking as the rice is cooking.

Add the onion and garlic, stir, and cook for about 1 minute. Add the stock, bay leaf, scant 1 teaspoon sea salt, and the whole chiles, if using. Raise the heat to high, bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium, and cook for 4 minutes, stirring occasionally. Cover, reduce the heat to very low, and simmer until all the liquid is absorbed, about 15 minutes longer.

Remove from the heat and let stand, covered, for 10 minutes. Before serving, remove the bay leaf and chiles and fluff the rice with a fork. Makes 5 or 6 servings.

RED RICE

1 can (**14½** oz/455 g) whole tomatoes,
drained
3 tablespoons chopped white onion
2 small cloves garlic
¼ cup (2 fl oz/60 ml) corn or sunflower oil
1 cup (7 oz/220 g) medium-grain white rice
1/3 cup (2 oz/60 g) each fresh or frozen
peas, fresh or frozen corn kernels, and diced
peeled carrot
3 serrano chiles, slit down one side
6 fresh cilantro (fresh coriander) sprigs, tied
together
Sea salt

Put the tomatoes, onion, and garlic in a blender and process until smooth. Set aside, in a saucepan over medium-high heat, heat the oil. When hot, add the rice and stir until it just starts to change color, about 1 minute. Do not allow it to brown. Add the tomato mixture and stir gently to blend. Add 2 cups (16 fl oz/500 ml) hot water, the peas, corn, carrot, chiles, cilantro, and 1½ teaspoons sea salt. Bring to a boil, shaking the pan to mix the ingredients.

Reduce the heat to low. Taste the broth and add more sea salt if needed, then cover and cook for about 10 minutes.

Uncover and stir carefully so that all of the broth is mixed in (most will have been absorbed). Re-cover and cook until all the broth is absorbed, about 10 minutes longer. Remove from the heat and let stand, covered, for 10 minutes. Before serving, remove the cilantro and chiles and fluff the rice with a fork. Makes 4-6 servings.

CHICKEN, TURKEY, OR BEEF STOCK

2 lb (1 kg) chicken or turkey bones, wings, necks, or other parts, or 2 lb (1 kg) beef bones (preferably with marrow)

1 white onion, quartered

1 celery stalk with leaves

3 cloves garlic

10 peppercorns

2 bay leaves Sea salt

Put the bones and/or other parts in a large pot and add 3 qt (3 l) water. Add the onion, celery, and garlic. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, skimming off any foam from the surface. Add the peppercorns and bay leaves, reduce the heat to low, cover partially, and simmer for 3-4 hours. If too much liquid boils away, add 1 cup (8 fl oz/ 250 ml) water or as needed to end up with 1½-2 qt (1½-2l) stock. Keep tasting, and when the flavor seems just right, add sea salt to taste, simmer a bit longer, and then remove from the heat. Let cool, then strain the stock through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean container. Cover and refrigerate overnight. The next day, using a large spoon, remove and discard the hardened fat from the surface.

Cover and refrigerate the stock for up to 3 days, or pour into airtight containers or zippered plastic freezer bags and freeze for up to 3 months. Makes 1½-2 qt (1½-2l).

POT BEANS

- 1 lb (500 g) dried black or pinto beans
- 2 tablespoons fresh pork lard (page 114), rendered bacon fat, or canola oil
- ½ white onion, coarsely chopped
- 2 fresh epazote sprigs, if cooking black beans, or fresh cilantro (fresh coriander) sprigs
- Sea salt
- 3 oz (90 g) queso fresco or feta cheese, crumbled, for serving (optional)

Pick over and rinse the beans, discarding any broken beans or grit. Transfer the beans to a pot and add water to cover by 3–4 inches (7.5–10 cm). Bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat, reduce the heat to medium-low, and allow to simmer.

Meanwhile, in a small frying pan over medium heat, melt the lard or fat or heat the oil. Add the onion and sauté until browned, about 8 minutes. Add to the beans, scraping in all of the melted fat. Cover partially and cook the

beans until they are just tender, 2-3 hours, stirring occasionally and adding water if necessary to maintain the level of water well above the beans. Add the epazote, if using black beans, or cilantro and 1½ teaspoons sea salt and continue to cook until the beans are very soft, 40-60 minutes longer.

The beans will keep, covered, in the refrigerator for up to 4 days. If serving the beans as they are, ladle the broth and beans into bowls and garnish with the cheese, if using, or use in other recipes. Makes 6 servings, with leftovers.

REFRIED BEANS

½ cup (4 oz/125 g) fresh pork lard (page 114) or ½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) canola or safflower oil

½ white onion, finely chopped

4 cups (28 oz/875 g) Pot Beans (left) with
2 cups (16 fl oz/500 ml) broth (see Notes)

Sea salt

3 oz (90 g) queso fresco or feta cheese,

crumbled, for serving (optional)
Fried tortilla strips or chips (page 10,
optional)

In a large, heavy frying pan over medium heat, melt the lard or heat the oil. Add the onion and sauté, stirring frequently, until golden and soft, about 5 minutes.

Pour in 1 cup (7 oz 220 g) of the beans with some of the broth, smashing them down with a potato masher or the back of a large spoon. Continue until all of the beans and their broth have been added and mashed. Raise the heat to medium-high and cook until the beans begin to dry out, about 10 minutes. Taste and add sea salt, if needed.

Transfer to a warmed platter or individual plates and sprinkle with the cheese, if using. If desired, serve the fried tortilla strips alongside for scooping up the beans. Makes 4–6 servings.

Notes: Frijoles refritos, commonly called refried

beans in the United States, are more accurately translated as "well-fried" beans. They can also be made with canned beans. Drain and rinse the canned beans and substitute water for the bean broth.

SALSA VERDE

12 tomatillos, about 1 lb (500 g) total weight, husked and rinsed (page 17)

4 serrano or 2 jalapeño chiles

2 cloves garlic

Sea salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup ($2\frac{1}{2}$ oz/**75** g) finely chopped white onion

2 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro (fresh coriander)

Put the tomatillos and chiles in a saucepan over medium heat and add water to cover. Bring to a simmer and cook, uncovered, until the tomatillos are soft, about 15 minutes.

Drain, reserving some of the liquid, and

transfer to a blender. Add the garlic and process briefly until thinned but still coarse. It may be necessary to add up to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) of the reserved liquid. Pour into a small serving bowl and stir in $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon sea salt or to taste.

Just before serving, stir in the onion and cilantro. Makes about $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups (20 fl oz/ 625 ml).

Make-Ahead Tip: This salsa can be stored, covered, in the refrigerator for up to 2 days. If it thickens too much, stir in a spoonful or so of water.

GLOSSARY

Many areas in the United States, and in some other countries, are home to growing Mexican communities and have ethnic grocery stores or mainstream supermarkets that cater to a diversity of customers and cooking

styles. If you do not live in an area where Mexican food-stuffs are readily available, look to specialty-food stores, mail-order retailers, and the Internet as good sources for authentic Mexican ingredients.

ACHIOTE PASTE This deep orange paste is made from the hard seeds of the tropical annatto tree. The seeds are ground with spices and mixed with garlic and vinegar or the juice of bitter oranges. The paste is popular in the kitchens of the Yucatan peninsula. Look for it in Mexican markets. Once opened, store tightly capped in the refrigerator.

ACITRÓN This mildly sweet, crystal-lized form of the biznaga cactus can be found in some Mexican markets. Candied pineapple may be substituted.

BAY LEAVES The bay leaves used in Mexican cooking are similar to those of the California laurel. Often used together with marjoram and thyme, bay leaves are sold in bundles in Mexican markets as *hierbas de olores*.

BITTER ORANGE A citrus fruit that grows in parts

of Mexico, the bitter orange is used widely in the cooking of the Yucatan peninsula. Squat in shape, it has a very rough skin and is used for its juice, not for eating. The flavor is quite acidic. Bitter oranges are occasionally found in Latin American markets, especially in Texas, California, and Arizona, where they grow easily. If a recipe calls for bitter orange juice and you do not have access to the fruit, you may use a substitute made from other citrus juices: In a bowl, stir together 2 tablespoons fresh orange juice, 2 tablespoons fresh grapefruit juice, and 4 teaspoons fresh lime juice. Use at once, or cover and refrigerate for up to 2 days, although the taste diminishes.

CAZUELA This hefty, wide earthenware pot heats slowly and evenly and retains heat well, making it ideal for cooking and serving dishes such as Meatballs in Chipotle Sauce (page 82). If you have an electric stove, you may want to use a heat diffuser—a metal disk that sits between the burner and the pot—to protect the *cazuela* from the heat's intensity. Always cure a new *cazuela* before using it: Wash the *cazuela* well, then rub the exterior with the cut sides

of a large, halved garlic clove. Fill with water, bring to a boil over medium heat, and simmer for 30 minutes. Repeat one more time. If the *cazuela* is not used every month or so, repeat the curing process before using.

Finally, always transfer foods cooked in a *cazuela* to another container for storage.

CHICKEN, POACHED To make the poached chicken called for in recipes in this book, put 2 lb (1 kg) chicken breasts or thighs in a saucepan, add boiling water to cover, and place over medium-high heat until the water returns to a boil, skimming off any foam that forms on the surface. Reduce the heat to medium-low and add a slice of white onion, 4 peppercorns, and 1 clove garlic. Cover and simmer until the meat is opaque throughout, about 20 minutes. Add sea salt to taste during the last 5 minutes.

CHILE POWDER Finely ground dried chiles, chile powder is not to be mistaken for the commercial spice blend known as chili powder, which usually combines ground dried chiles, cumin, oregano, and

other seasonings and is used to flavor the well-known American Southwest stew of the same name. Pure chile powder, whether made from ancho or another chile variety, can be found in well-stocked markets and Mexican grocery stores, or you can make your own.

CHILES, DRIED Following are the dried chiles used in this book. For information on seeding and toasting dried chiles, see page 108.

Ancho: See page 14.

Arbol: A small, thin, reddish orange chile about 3 inches (7.5 cm) long and with smooth skin. These chiles are extremely *picante* and are used in table salsas.

Chipotle: See page 82.

Guajillo: A widely used long, pointed, brownish red chile with smooth skin. Its heat level varies from medium-hot to hot, and it has a sharp flavor.

Mulato: Similar to the ancho chile, only a darker brownish black. It has a full, chocolaty flavor, medium to mild heat, and wrinkled skin.

Pasilla: This shiny, narrow, wrinkled chile is about 6 inches (15 cm) long and has a blunt end. It is

brownish black, has a complex flavor, and is usually quite hot.

CHILES, FRESH Following are descriptions of the fresh chiles used in this book. For information on handling fresh chiles, see page 39. For information on roasting and seeding fresh chiles, see page 106.

Güero: Any light-skinned chile, usually pale yellow or "blond," about 4 inches (10 cm) long, 1 inch (2.5 cm) wide, and pointed at the end. It can be quite hot.

Habanero: A small green, yellow, or orange lantern-shaped chile that is extremely hot, with a distinctive fruity flavor.

Jalapeño: A dark green, fat chile that is usually about 2 inches (5 cm) long. It can be very hot.

Poblano: Named for the state of Puebla, the poblano is a polished deep green, tapered chile with broad shoulders. Poblano chiles are about 5 inches (13 cm) long and are moderately hot.

Serrano: A small, slender, shiny chile that is very hot, with a bright acidic flavor. It is available both in green and a ripened red.

CHILES, GRINDING DRIED To grind dried chiles,

first seed and toast them (page 108). Grind the toasted chiles into a fine powder in a spice grinder or in a mortar, and then pass through a fine-mesh sieve.

CILANTRO Introduced by the Spanish, this herb has become one of the signature seasonings of Mexico. The fresh green leaves resemble those of Italian (flat-leaf) parsley, but their pungent aniselike aroma and bright astringent taste are distinctive. Use it sparingly at first until you are familiar with its flavor. Look for sprigs with the smallest leaves for the cleanest flavor. It is also known as fresh coriander and Chinese parsley.

CINNAMON BARK, TRUE See page 85.

COMAL A flat, round griddle that is traditionally made of earthenware but also of cast iron or other metals. It is used to cook or warm tortillas, to toast seeds or dried chiles, or to roast garlic, onions, or tomatoes. A *comal* may be purchased in some Mexican markets.

CREMA See page 51.

CUMIN The seeds of a member of the parsley family, cumin has a sharp flavor. The whole seeds, freshly ground, are often used with garlic and other spices.

EPAZOTE See page 44.

GRINDER SPICE An electric countertop spice or small coffee grinder reserved for spices is handy not only for quickly grinding spices, but also chiles, seeds, and nuts—an essential step in many Mexican recipes. Freshly ground spices and other ingredients will boast a fuller flavor, so grind them just before use.

JICAMA See page 52.

LARD, PORK Rendered pork fat, or lard, lends a rich taste to many Mexican dishes, including tamales (page 20) and Refried Beans (page 111). Commercially packaged lard is available, but home-made lard is more flavorful. To make your own: Cut

1 lb (500 g) good-quality pork fat into small cubes, or use a food processor to chop even finer. Preheat the oven to 300°F (150°C). Put the fat in a large, heavy pan, preferably cast iron, and place in the oven. As it melts, pour off the melted fat through a medium-mesh sieve into a heatproof container. Continue cooking until most of the fat has melted and only light golden crisp bits remain, 30-45 minutes. Cover and store in the refrigerator for up to several months. Note: rendered lard has half the cholesterol of butter.

MASA See page 35.

MOLCAJETE This three-legged basalt mortar, along with its accompanying *tejolote* (pestle), is used for grinding ingredients and making sauces, especially salsas and guacamole. *Molcajetes* can be found in many Mexican markets or by mail order through specialty-cookware stores. Look for a dark gray or black mortar with small pores, so liquid won't leak out. To prepare the *molcajete* for use, toss in a handful of uncooked rice and grind to a powder. Repeat until no tiny pieces of grit from the stone are

present, usually 4-6 times. Rinse well.

NUTS, TOASTING To toast pine nuts, chopped pecans, and sliced or blanched almonds, preheat the oven to 275°F (135°C). Spread the nuts out in a small shallow pan and toast in the oven until fragrant and beginning to color, 5-10 minutes. Remove from the oven, transfer to a plate, and let cool.

ONIONS, MARINATED RED These onions are a tasty garnish for many Mexican dishes. In a heatproof bowl, combine 2 large red onions, thinly sliced or chopped, with boiling water to cover. Let soak until the onions just begin to lose some of their crispness, about 2 minutes. Drain well and return to the bowl. Add 3 tablespoons fresh bitter orange juice (page 113) or fresh lime juice; 1 habanero chile, roasted and seeded (page 106), then finely chopped; 1½ teaspoons sea salt, and a pinch of dried oregano. Marinate at room temperature for 1-2 hours, tossing occasionally, then cover and refrigerate until needed or for up to several weeks.

ONIONS. WHITE Most Mexican cooks use the

common white-skinned onion, which has a clear, pungent flavor that is enhanced by roasting (page 65).

OREGANO There are more than thirteen varieties of plants called oregano growing in Mexico, but the most common variety, *Lippia graveolens* from the verbenaceae family, is the one often labeled "Mexican oregano." It has a more pronounced flavor than Mediterranean varieties and can be found in Mexican markets and in many supermarkets.

PLANTAIN Closely related to the banana, the large, three-sided plantain is starchier and firmer. It is always cooked before eating. When ripe, fresh plantains have almost uniformly black skins and will yield to gentle finger pressure.

PUMPKIN SEEDS Seeds, especially pumpkin, have been a part of Mexican cooking since pre-Columbian times, both as thickeners and for flavor. Raw, hulled green pumpkin seeds can be found in natural-foods stores and in many supermarkets. They are always toasted before using.

QUESO FRESCO Meaning "fresh cheese" in Spanish, *queso fresco* is a soft, tangy, lightly salted cow's milk cheese that is crumbled or sliced before adding to dishes. Mild feta cheese may be substituted, but it should be rinsed first to remove excess salt.

SALT, SEA The more pronounced flavor of sea salt is ideal for cooking Mexican food. If substituting kosher salt, a bit more may have to be added. If a recipe involves a long cooking process, such as simmering beans or soup, always add salt at the end of the cooking, because the flavor will become concentrated as the liquid reduces.

TOMATILLOS See page 17.

TORTILLA PRESS Hinged metal tortilla presses can be found in Mexican groceries and specialty-cookware stores and catalogs. Look for heavy cast-iron, 6-inch (15-cm) presses with an $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) clearance between the plates on the hinge side. Avoid the lighter aluminum presses, which are not

as efficient and are easily broken.

TORTILLAS, WARMING To warm tortillas to serve as an accompaniment to many Mexican dishes, wrap stacks of 5 tortillas each in aluminum foil and warm in a 275°F (135°C) oven for 5-10 minutes. To heat fewer tortillas, put them, one at a time, on a *comal*, griddle, or frying pan over low heat, and warm for several seconds on each side.